DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 220 172 JC 820 436

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TITLE Innovative Approaches to Delivering Academic Assistance to Students.
INSTITUTION Center for the Study of Community Colleges, Los Angeles, Calif.
PUB DATE 27 Sep 82
NOTE 20p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Advising; Community Colleges; Counseling Services; *Dropout Prevention; Faculty Advisers; *High Risk Students; Multicampus Districts; Potential Dropouts; Remedial Programs; *School Holding Power; Student Adjustment; Student Attrition; Student College Relationship; *Student Personnel Services; Two Year Colleges; Urban Education

ABSTRACT

In an effort to determine how student support services are meeting the needs of underprepared and part-time students, and assisting in efforts to increase program completion rates, the Center for the Study of Community Colleges conducted telephone interviews with support service personnel in six large urban community college districts (i.e., in Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, Maricopa County, Miami-Dade County, and St. Louis). The study identified exemplary approaches in outreach efforts, early and midterm interventions, use of faculty referral slips, coordination of support services with content courses, identifying and reducing attrition in high-risk courses, block programming, and funding. In addition, the study identified trends toward: (1) support staff visits to classrooms to promote services and programs; (2) attempts to identify and assist high-risk students even before the first course exam in order to decrease attrition; (3) policies permitting high-risk students to enroll in particular content courses only if they receive supplemental support instruction; (4) inclusion of monitoring student progress, advising, and counseling as part of all credit courses; (5) faculty involvement in the delivery of support services; (6) coordination of academic support services with particular subject areas; and (7) funding patterns for academic support services based on program operation costs. (KL)

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INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO DELIVERING ACADEMIC ASSISTANCE TO STUDENTS

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September 27, 1982

JC 820 436

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INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO DELIVERING ACADEMIC ASSISTANCE

Administrators in urban community colleges are looking toward their academic service personnel to aid them in meeting certain demands being made on their institutions. These demands include: (1) providing assistance to the large numbers of students who enter college with serious deficiencies in basic skills, poorly developed study habits, and inadequate mastery of high school subject matter; (2) delivering a wide range of support services to students, many of whom hold part-time or full-time jobs or have family responsibilities and other demands on their time which serve as barriers to their seeking extra help; and (3) assisting in efforts to increase program completion rates.

In an effort to find out how colleges are attempting to meet these challenging objectives, the Center for the Study of Community Colleges conducted telephone interviews with support service personnel in six large urban community college districts (Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, Maricopa, Miami-Dade, St. Louis). The purpose of these interviews was to identify exemplary programs in the areas of student support services.

OUTREACH PROGRAMS

Studies have shown that when left to their own volition, many students will not take advantage of the support services available to them. In a recently conducted survey, students who were asked why they had not made use of a needed service responded that they did not have the time; they did not feel it was important; they did not know the service was available to them; no one suggested they do so; or college credit is not awarded for doing so.

Rather than wait for students to seek help, some academic support staff members are going into classrooms to promote the availability and usefulness of their services. These efforts include: describing the support services available to students in a short videotape presentation shown in all freshman classes; working with subject area faculty to identify early in the term those students who need some assistance; and giving mini-lectures in content area classes. Some of these innovative methods designed to increase student use of needed support services are discussed below.

A handbook describing the support services available at Dallas' Mountain View College is distributed to all students in the orientation program. The booklet is called Making It at Mountain View College. The college is currently developing a short videotape presentation based on the booklet that will be shown in all introductory courses.

Support service personnel at many of the colleges surveyed were performing a number of services in content classes. To illustrate, at Dallas' North Lake College, all instructors in the freshman English class, as well as many instructors teaching courses in other subject areas, invite staff from the learning skills center to administer the Nelson-Denny Reading Test to their students. In many instances, representatives from the learning skills center are invited to an instructor's class to discuss the results of the test. They use this opportunity

to promote the services available at the learning center and to let students know whether, on the basis of their test score, they could profit from the various support services offered.

Staff members who work in the learning skills center at St. Louis' Florissant Valley College make it known to faculty that they will come into their classes to give mini-lectures on a variety of topics. These include: footnoting, developing a bibliography, writing a research paper, using resources in the library, using a study system with the course testbook, and preparing for and taking tests. Such classroom visits lead to improved learning and more referrals to academic support service programs. These services also enable students to see for themselves how applicable the learning skills services are to their college work.

EARLY INTERVENTION PROGRAMS

Several colleges have developed early intervention programs to increase the numbers of students who complete their courses. Miami-Dade has recently initiated several different intervention programs designed to provide students with the extra assistance needed to succeed in their academic courses. Students who, on the basis of an initial assessment, are likely to have some difficulties in the content courses may enroll in a special class to receive extra hours of instruction in the learning resources center (LRC). Students at Miami-Dade who are doing poorly in a content course and who are referred to the learning resources center (LRC) are given two options. The student may elect to use the college's support services in exchange for a tuition refund or they may arrange to receive special assistance in the content course. Those who choose the second option are required to go to the LRC on a regular basis for one, two, or three credits. The students bring course outlines, textbooks, and assignments to work on at the LRC. The staff members communicate with individual content faculty about the student's activities and progress.

An exciting approach of identifying and assisting students who might experience difficulty in a content course is being developed at Florissant Valley College, St. Louis. The program operates in the following manner. Students in all sections of American Politics are given a reading test during the first week of class. At the end of the third week of class, students in all sections of the course in American Politics are given an exam on the content covered to date. After the test results have been returned a reading instructor attends the class and lets students know how their performances can be improved by enrollment in the adjunct skills class for the course. The adjunct class for American Politics begins the fourth week of the term. Students get one

hour of credit for this class and they must pay for the additional credit to enroll. The skills instructor sits in all class sections of the content course, takes notes, and goes over the reading materials. He or she then uses this information to teach study skills in the adjunct course.

MIDTERM INTERVENTION PROGRAMS

Studies show that a high percentage of students who are doing poorly in a course at midterm will not successfully complete that class. Armed with this information, administrators at some urban community colleges have instituted midterm intervention programs. For example, halfway through the semester all students at Chicago's Kennedy-King College with grades of D, F, or who have poor attendance records receive a letter instructing them to set up appointments at the counseling center for a midterm interview. At these interviews the counselors arrange for students to receive the extra tutoring and assistance they need to complete the course in which they are experiencing difficulty. The program has proved to be very successful. In all sections of an introductory social science class ninety percent of the students doing D or F work at midterm who came in for extra assistance went on to complete the course compared to only 13 percent who did not receive extra academic assistance.

Monitoring of student progress, advisement, and counseling are built into all credit courses at Miami-Dade through its computerized Academic Alert and Advisement System. At midterm, all faculty members provide information on questions pertaining to student performance and attendance in their courses. Responses to these questions are then fed into Miami-Dade's computer system which, in turn, generates personalized letters to the college's 45,000 students containing information on their performance in each of their classes. The letters also contain information on where they can receive assistance, what they need to accomplish prior to the next registration, and whether they are eligible for the honors program.

The Midterm Enhancement Program developed at Chicago's Malcolm X College is unique in two respects: (1) the supplemental instruction for students in need of extra help is provided by the faculty member teaching the college-level content course; and (2) the extra assistance is offered and funded by the adult education division. At midterm a faculty member has the option of offering an extra hour of instruction for those students who need assistance in the course. The supplemental class, which starts the ninth week of the term, is taught by the faculty member but is offered as an adult education course. The faculty member is paid for one hour at the adult education rate to teach this extra hour during the second eight weeks of the semester. Although this supplemental course is optional, faculty are able to induce most failing students to participate. There is no charge for this participation in the extra-hour class because at City College of Chicago adult education courses are free to all students who are enrolled for six or more hours of credit.

Studies on the effectiveness of this program have shown that students with unsatisfactory grades at midterm who participated in this program were much more likely to complete their course than those who did not elect to take the extra hours of instruction. Additional evidence of the success of this Midterm Enhancement Program is that it is now being used at several other City of Chicago colleges.

REFERRAL SLIPS

Another effective approach for increasing the likelihood of students obtaining needed support services is through the use of faculty referral forms. To illustrate, if a student at Dallas' Eastfield College is experiencing difficulty in a class, the faculty member can fill out a referral slip. This slip contains a list of skills, and all the instructor has to do is check the area in which the student needs assistance. The faculty member gives the slip to the student who is told to go to the learning laboratory for help. The staff at the learning center sets up a program for the student. The faculty member who made the referral is provided with information on the student's attendance and progress in the program.

Faculty members at Richland College in Dallas are provided with a check-list evaluation form that they can fill out whenever they read a student paper. This evaluation form contains a list of areas associated with writing. The instructor simply checks off those areas in which the student needs help. The student takes this form together with his or her written work to the college learning center to receive help. Many of the instructors give students extra grade points if they receive help with their writing.

COORDINATING SUPPORT SERVICES WITH SUBJECT AREA COURSES

Many support service personnel attribute the problems associated with remedial courses and learning skills services to the programs being removed from the student's immediate academic course work. As long as study skills services remain segregated and isolated from the content courses, they cannot serve all the students they should be reaching, they cannot adequately integrate their curriculum with the content course, and above all, their staff cannot cooperate in a coordinated manner with the college's entire academic community to meet the challenges of a diverse study body. In an effort to improve the effectiveness of their programs, a number of colleges are attempting to coordinate their academid support services with particular subject area courses.

IDENTIFICATION OF HIGH-RISK COURSES

At many colleges there are certain introductory courses in which the percentage of students who receive unsatisfactory grades of D, F, or Withdrawal is exceedingly high. For example, investigators at the University of Missouri, Kansas City, found that over 40 percent of the students were receiving unsatisfactory grades in their introductory courses in biology, physics, chemistry, history, and economics. Furthermore, it was found that the greatest attrition occurred during the first six weeks of each semester. The sixth week coincided with first exams in most courses. Administrators at this institution concluded that if attrition were to be substantially reduced, effective services would have to be provided to students within the first six weeks. For most students, however, the six-weeks' time constraint precluded extensive diagnosis of individual problems and individualized academic support programs.

In an attempt to decrease the attrition rates in their high-risk courses, educators at University of Missouri, as well as a number of urban community colleges, have initiated course arrangements in which a learning skills instructor and a subject area faculty member schedule these sections so that all the students in the subject course are also enrolled in the learning skills or adjunct class.

These adjunct classes designed to teach reading, writing, and study skills to students enrolled in a particular college-level course are typically based on the following model. The reading and study skills courses are coordinated with introductory courses in the sciences, social sciences, mathematics, and the humanities. The primary function of the instructor of the reading and study skills class (adjunct class) is to assess the demands of

the content course with which the skills class is paired and then to present the skills needed by the students to complete the course satisfactorily. Topics typically covered in the adjunct class include: effective reading of the textbooks for the content course, underlining and other note-taking strategies, lecture note taking, reviewing for tests, test-taking techniques, and preparation in writing essay exams. Topics in science and math adjunct courses reflect the demands of the content courses in those areas.

Studies conducted at the University of Missouri, Kansas City, suggest that this approach has resulted in higher course completion rates and better student performance in the class. There are also significant financial savings associated with assigning a learning skills specialist to teach an adjunct class. The learning skills specialist teaching the adjunct section of an American history course was able to bring effective support to 106 students in two semesters at an average cost of less than $12 per student ($600 per course is the amount paid to the adjunct course leader). According to the investigators, no single tutor could have accommodated the needs of so many students, nor could the per-student cost have been as low in individual tutorials. Thus the supplemental instruction appears cost-effective in terms of both staff and budget allocations.

A somewhat different approach of providing assistance to students enrolled in a high-risk course is being tried at Eastfield College (Dallas). Here it was found that many students were having difficulty completing the introductory college chemistry course due to their inadequate background in mathematics. In an effort to address this problem, all students enrolled in the introductory chemistry class who score below a certain level on a math test are required to enroll in a one-credit hour developmental math course. This section, taught by a chemistry instructor, meets for 16 contact hours with the instruction concentrated in the first six weeks of the term.

BLOCK PROGRAMMING

A sizable percentage of students entering urban community colleges do so with serious educational deficiencies. For the most part, these students need more than one or two semesters of make-up work to prepare them adequately for admission into college-level work. Chicago's Loop College, Essex County Community College (New Jersey), Greater Hartford Community College (Connecticut), and Mesa College (Phoenix), are among the urban colleges that have initiated block programs to adequately serve these students. These programs combine basic skills courses, academic support services, and college-level content courses.

Students enrolled in the ASTRA Program at Greater Hartford Community College have their schedules planned for two semesters. In the first term, students, in addition to receiving career and personal counseling, are enrolled in an interdisciplinary program of composition, reading, and speech. This curriculum, designed by the college's English faculty, is unique in that students are asked to work on similar objectives each week from the perspective of their reading, writing, and speech courses. The second term is comprised of an interdisciplinary course arrangement of western civilization, reading, speech, and composition. In the reading class, students improve their reading and study skills by using the text from the western civilization course. In the composition course, students write themes, answer essay type questions, and work on a research paper for the content course. In speech, student presentations are based on their research papers and the content of their western civilization courses. This approach is similar to that developed by the staff at Essex County's Academic Foundation Center and Mesa College's OZ program.

The first semester of the IN program at Loop College consists of a 12 credit-hour block of work in reading, composition, psychology (self-development), educational and vocational counseling, and a content course chosen by the students to correspond to their educational objectives. In many instances, the content course (e.g., biology, sociology, child development) is team taught and coordinated with the basic skills course in reading and writing. For example, in the combination biology-English composition course, the English instructor uses materials from the biology course for assignments, and the biology instructor requires writing assignments in and outside of class.

FUNDING SUPPORT SERVICES

Since the early 1970s there has been a steady increase in the number of students in the community colleges who are in need of academic assistance. Providing this assistance is very costly to the colleges in terms of staff time, and to a lesser extent, materials. To illustrate, A. Zachary Yamba, president of Essex County Community College, noted recently that the resources of his institution were strained and will continue to be so unless the formula for funding community colleges in New Jersey is changed from being enrollment-driven to a formula that is based on program cost. According to Yamba, a college's ability to provide the necessary resources for its student support programs could be enhanced by the passage of categorical and differential funding.

Robert McCabe, president of Miami-Dade Community College, has also pointed out that colleges should be reimbursed for the extra, non-class time that is spent assisting students with their course work. Under such an arrangement, the college would have an incentive to encourage students in regular content courses to make use of the institution's support services.

The Florida State Board of Education, Division of Community Colleges has agreed to fund student contact hours with a college's educational support services on a one-year provisional basis. Under this program, if a student enrolls in a regular content course and obtains three extra hours of assistance per week, then the college gets reimbursed for the contact hours of extra assistance. The students do not receive credit for obtaining the extra help, but the college does in the form of a financial reimbursement from the state. Support services can be delivered through a bulk method in which an entire class would receive a certain number of extra-course hours of educational assistance each week. Thus, if all the enrollees in an English class each needed two extra hours

per week with their writing, the students would receive three hours of credit for the class and the college would get reimbursed for three hours of FTE and for two contact hours for each student in the course.

Florida community colleges will have to charge students a minimal fee per contact hour for use of the educational support services. The fee will be well under one dollar per contact hour.

Student support services are typically funded through a fixed percentage of the college's total operating budget. At many colleges, this allocation does not allow for the necessary number of staff members needed to provide a full complement of support services to all students. Among the approaches being taken at some colleges to overcome the constraints of limited staff and resources are: (1) placing the responsibility for academic advisement of students in the hands of the faculty; (2) assigning interested faculty members to teach and advise in the learning skills center as part of their regular workload; and (3) generating funds for the college by having learning skills staff members provide their services to students in one or two unit college credit courses.

CONCLUSION

This review of innovative programs indicates that a number of significant changes in the delivery of student support services are taking place. The most pronounced of these trends are listed below.

(1) Rather than wait for students to seek help, academic support staff members are going into content classrooms to promote the availability and usefulness of their services.

(2) Academic support service staff are instituting early intervention programs designed to identify and provide assistance to students who may experience difficulty in a content class before the time of the first exam when much attrition takes place.

(3) Colleges are changing policies so that students who, on the basis of an initial assessment, appear likely to have some difficulties in the content course are permitted to enroll in that course only if they receive extra hours of instruction from the academic support services staff.

(4) Several support services such as the monitoring of student progress, advisement and counseling are being built into all credit courses.

(5) Academic support services staff are working cooperatively with faculty members to coordinate their services with particular subject area classes.

(6) Faculty members are being asked to participate in the delivery of academic support services, particularly in the area of advisement. Some faculty members are being asked to teach and advise in the learning center as part of their regular workload.

(7) Community college administrators are requesting that their academic support services be funded on the basis of the costs to operate these programs.

In most instances, the impetus for developing these innovative programs was the belief that traditional approaches of delivering and financing student services were no longer adequate to meet the demands of urban community colleges in the 1980s. The trends noted above show educators' growing awareness that they can no longer rely on student initiative to take advantage of campus resources, and that student support services can no longer be operated in isolation from the colleges' instructional programs.

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